UNITED STATES ARMY CHAPLAIN SCHOOL

A Writing Requirement.

THE CHAPLAIN:
COUNSELING THE FAMILY TROUBLED WITH A COMMUNICATIONS FAILURE

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The military chaplain currently counsels families which show in extreme the current trends of America's society -- the geographic mobility, the consumption of alcohol, the family separation, divorce and remarriage.

Yet, if I, as a chaplain in the US Army, were asked, "What has been the most common family-problem you encounter?" I would have to reply that it has to do with the breakdown of communication in the family. It is all too usual for a disturbed wife to tearfully plead with me, "Can you do anything, chaplain, to get my husband to talk with me? He won't talk!" Or the soldier who wants to save his marriage says, "My wife clams up. She won't tell me anything. I can't read her mind."

The family in conflict is a troubled family. The chaplain in the role of counselor to the troubled family must first become aware of the true problem causing conflict in the marriage. Secondly, he must make the counselee aware of the cause. And, thirdly, a therapeutic situation exists when the counselee works to resolve his problem independent of the chaplain.

At the crux of the many family problems in the Army today, communication is the key. There is a growing lack of communication and even an inability to communicate between many mates, between parents and children (at an increasingly younger age), and within the family. This is causing, perpetuating, and intensifying many family life problems. Improved communications would lessen

or eliminate most problems, such as, alienation, pressures of society, depersonalization in society, excessiveness, distortion of values and attitudes, autocratic approach of the parents, et al.

There is not enough listening in the family. While parents are often far too inflexible and often inarticulate, there is now a boundless questioning which, in itself, can be a very threatening and cause even less communication or an increase of negative communication. The educational systems to which our youths are exposed teach openness, challange and inquiry. But, in these very systems they do not always come up with the same ideas or values as adults hold. Often, surprisingly, though, they come back to the same values which were "given" to them earlier, but now for different reasons.

Research indicates that husband-wife communication is related both to problem solving and the incidence of problems in the family.[1] I propose to stress in this paper the importance in the family of communication for problem solving.

Dr. David Petersen displays his intense interest in the two general areas sociological concern: marital communication and family problems. He gleans two hypotheses [2] from previous research and theoretical conceptions to be tested:

Hypothesis 1: Husband-wife communication is positively related to problem solving in the family.

Hypothesis 2: Husband-wife communication is positively related to the incidence of problems present in the family.

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[1] David M. Petersen, "Husband-Wife Communication and Family Problems," Sociology and Social Research, 53 (April 1969), 376.

[2] Ibid.

The first hypothesis is based on the assumption that for problems present in the family, effective husband-wife communication will result in the solving of these problems. The assumption underlying the second hypothesis is that, with increased and effective communication, there will be a lower occurrence of problems in the family. In other words, husbands and wives who communicate more effectively are more competent in handling their family problems and will, as a result, have fewer problems.

Questionnaires were personally delivered to 116 families at a state university to be filled out by the husbands. All in the sample were under 30 years of age and were working toward a graduate or undergraduate degree. The median length of marriage was 3.5 years, with 60% of the families having one or more children. The median number of school years completed for the husbands was 16.4 years, for wives 13.7 years. Forty-nine percent of the wives held full time jobs outside the home.

The instrument used to measure husband-wife communication is based upon the subject's responses to a version of the Hobart-Klausner scale.[3] Communication is defined as the exchange of meaningful symbols, both words and gestures. This scale is based upon two aspects of communication, empathetic communication and barriers to communication. Empathic communication items pertain to nonverbal and nonovert communication. These are situations where one spouse was able to anticipate

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[3]Charles W. Hobart and William J. Klausner, "Some Social Interactional Correlates of Marital Role Disagreements and Marital Adjustment," Marriage and Family Living, 21 (August 1959), 256-63.

the other's response. Barrier items are related to issues and relationships which tend to be taboo in husband-wife verbal interaction. The response categories ranged from "very frequently" to "never," with scoring accomplished by assigning heavier weights to answers that indicated a reduction in barriers to communication and to items that indicated an increase in empathy.

Thirty-five problem items based on several roles and activities present in the family in the areas of child rearing, husband-wife relations, style of life, community involvement and religion, were used in the questionnaire.[4] This information was used to group families into categories of problem "solving" and problem "incidence".

In order to test the first hypothesis, families were divided into "high" and "low" communication families based on a median score of 72.05 as a cutting point. In addition, families were dichotomized into "high"and "low" problem solving families on the basis of how many problems they had successfully resolved (if the respondent rated "high", at least 50% of the problems "decreased"). A response of either "remained the same" or "increased" was determined to mean no solution.

The application of the chi-square test indicates a significant relationship between husband-wife communication and problem solving in the family.

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[4]Ibid. The original Hobart-Klausner scale contains 26 items, eight of which appear in Petersen's present version.

TABLE I

CHI-SQUARE TEST BETWEEN HUSBAND-WIFE COMMUNICATION AND PROBLEM SOLVING IN THE FAMILY

Husband-Wife Communication	Family Problem Solving: Low Problem Solv. Fam.	Family Problem Solving: High Problem Solv. Fam.
Low Communication Families (N=60)	75%	25%
High Communication Families (N=56)	50%	50%

$X^2 = 7.887$ p= .01

You may observe from this that those high communication families are more likely to have solved problems together than the low communication families. The majority of low communication families are also low problem solving families. On this basis it would appear that husband-wife communication is related to problem solving in the family. Communication was significantly related to problem solving for five specific problems: recreation and leisure time (p= .048), tenseness and low family morale (p= .01), sex relations with mate (p= .055), criticism and fault finding (p= .035), and differences in member's expectations of his family (p= .008). The findings indicate that communication is significantly related to the solving of 15% of the individual role specific problems.

In order to test the second hypothesis, families were divided into "high" and "low" problem families. The range of problems was from a low of zero to a high of 23; the median

number of problems was 6.48. Again, the median score was used as the cutting point to dichotomize families. Those above were classified as "high" problem families and those below the median as "low" problem families. As you see in the table below, applying the chi-square test, a positive relationship exists between husband-wife communication and the incidence of family problems.

TABLE II

CHI-SQUARE TEST BETWEEN HUSBAND-WIFE COMMUNICATION AND THE NUMBER OF FAMILY PROBLEMS

Husband-Wife Communication	Family Problem Solving: Low Problem Solv. Fam.	Family Problem Solving: High Problem Solv. Fam.
Low Communication Families (N=60)	40%	60%
High Communication Families (N=56)	66%	34%

$X^2 = 7.178$ p= .01

You will observe from this that those families with high communication scores are less likely to have problems than those low communication families. On the basis of this finding, Dr. Petersen concluded that the low incidence of some problems in the family is related to effective communication between husband and wife. Effective communication between marital partners is significantly related to the low incidence of the following problems: recreation and leisure time (p= .01), too little time

spent together as a family (p= .05), conflict of religious views (p= .01), husband's job and its demands (p= .01), tenseness and low family morale (p= .05), lack of closeness between mates (p= .01), who does what about family responsibilities (p= .01), sex relations with mate (p= .02), criticism and fault finding (p= .01), differences in member's expectations of his family (p= .001), differences between marriage ideals and reality (p= .01), emotional and/or mental instability of family members (p= .01), who decides what among family members (p= .05), and family planning, contraception or spacing of children (p= .01).

The introduction of the following central variables into the analysis did not alter the original relationships for either problem solving or the occurrence of family problems: mobility of the family, religious affiliation, employment of wife, age of husband and wife, years of school, place of birth and length of marriage. Additionally, the introduction of these control variables did not change the significant relationships between husband-wife communication and any of the problems specific to roles.

My criticism of Dr. Petersen's analysis is that the sample should have also shown the responses of the wife of each respondent, for in the areas of husband-wife relationships, child-rearing, styles of life, religion, et al., the wife might have often disagreed with her husband. Also, one might challange the validity of using only students of higher education in the sample, because

the special pressure placed on them in their training. I contend that students are in a temporary environmental situation with minimal concern for the health of their community, except for what it will do to help them achieve their educational goals. My reason, though, for referring to Dr. Petersen's research is that among the Army's junior officers, non-commissioned officers and enlisted men there are notable parallels to the university sample in, not only age and length of marriage, but also geographic mobility and pre-occupation with self-improvement. The latter two appear to me to be the source of much conflict during the earlier years of marriage.

Dr. Petersen made a very important observation when he commented, "Two persons may live together for many years in a marital relationship and yet fail to interpret each other's motives on issues of importance."[5] He has convincingly pointed out the importance of communication for the recognition and interpretation of problems in the family. Nevertheless, he adds that, "The results of the present study merely delineate the problem, they do not solve it."[6]

The chaplain-counselor must recognize that communication is the key to healthy family interaction. Nathan W. Ackerman suggests what otherwise might result:

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[5]Petersen, "Husband-Wife Communication," p.383.
[6]Ibid.

> Frequently, the true nature of marital conflict is denied, concealed or rationalized behind displacements and projections onto other relationships, like parent-child and parent-grandparent. Marital partners who are caught in conflicts that they cannot resolve often maintain a defensive distance by putting other family members between them."[7]

Just as they have to take the time necessary to talk with each other, I strongly believe that parents must turn everything off to talk with their children.

The chaplain, who recognizes a failure of communications as the crucial cause for problems afflicting partners in a marriage, will want to make these mates aware of this cause of conflict. He will want to show them ways they may be helped to cope with it. In the long run, the couple will probably be able to work out solutions to the problem, once aware of what has happened -- or failed to happen -- when they could not talk their problems out with each other as equals. Healing of the pain suffered by a troubled family takes place in this kind of counseling.

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[7]Nathan W. Ackerman, Treating the Troubled Family (New York: Basic Books, 1966), p.114.

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